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Minkenberg, Michael

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*Michael Minkenberg*

# The Tea Party and American Populism Today: Between Protest, Patriotism and Paranoia

### Abstract

This article takes a closer look at the Tea Party by adding a transatlantic perspective. Its aim is to show that the Tea Party is a genuine right-wing movement with strong affinities to the Republican Party which revives particular American traditions of conservatism *and* the radical right. Its support base is not ‘the mainstream’ but a particular cross section of the white middle classes. In this, it is the American mirror image of many European parties and movements of the populist radical right which share the Tea Party’s anti-establishment message, its ultra-patriotism and ethnocentrism. It also shares some of its characteristics with the Christian Right with which it competes and cooperates when aiming at influencing the Republican Party and Washington while marking the merger of the Christian Right with Southern conservatism.

*Key words:* Populism, American conservatism, radical right, Christian Right, Republican Party

## 1. Introduction

*“Keep your government hands off my Medicare!”*  
(at a town hall meeting in South Carolina, quoted in *Zernike* 2011a, p. 135)

After more than one and a half years of its existence and unmistakable presence in American politics, and of its accompanying scrutiny, the Tea Party movement remains a deeply ambivalent phenomenon. Ambivalent in terms of its independence as a movement or and its relationship to the Republican party, conservative business elites, or right-wing media; ambivalent in terms of its message, the kind of change it advocates in explicit demarcation from the change its adherents attribute to President Obama; ambivalent about its social base as a true grass-roots or an elite-driven network of organizations and activists, a middle class or cross-class movement (see *Rahe* 2011; *Rasmussen/Schoen* 2010; *Williamson* et al. 2011). It has been credited with a number of things – as well as being denied such credit: as being a veto player (within the Congressional veto player, i.e. the House Republicans) which prevented a sensible solution to the deficit and debt crisis in the summer of 2011 (see article by *Lynn* in this issue), or as being just a “phantom” at the debt limit opera (see *Zernike* 2011b); as “fundamentally remaking” the entire American party system (*Rasmussen/Schoen* 2010) or as re-doing the Republican party (*Rahe* 2011); as the driving force behind the recapture of the House by the Republicans in November

2010 (*Bromwich* in: *Dworkin* et al. 2010) or as not much more than a rattling noise which will pass away soon (*Brooks* 2010). More generally, it has been characterized as a populist anti-government revolt and, alternatively, as a reincarnation of American conservatism, as something principally new, or as the renewal of long-standing right-wing traditions in line with Pat Buchanan, George Wallace, Barry Goldwater, Joseph Mc Carthy, and others (*Rahe* 2011; *Rasmussen/Schoen* 2010; *Williamson/Skocpol/Cottin* 2011; *Zernike* 2011a).

This article takes a closer look at the Tea Party not by simply interpreting it in the context of American politics and history but by adding a transatlantic perspective. Its aim is to show that the Tea Party is a genuine right-wing movement with strong affinities to the Republican Party (rather than being independent or bi-partisan) which revives particular American traditions of conservatism *and* the radical right. Its support base is not ‘the mainstream’, as its sympathizers suggest (see *Rasmussen/Schoen* 2010), but a particular cross section of the white middle classes. In this, it is the American mirror image of many European parties and movements of the populist radical right which share the Tea Party’s anti-establishment message, its ultra-patriotism and ethnocentrism, its particular look at and instrumentalization of the past – though not its decentralized organizational characteristics. It shares some of its characteristics with another very American movement, the Christian Right with which it competes and cooperates when aiming at influencing the Republican Party and Washington – in the tradition of the New Right of the 1970s and the conservative revolution of the 1980s (see *Minkenberg* 1990, 2003; also *Hertzke* 1993; *Berlet/Lyons* 2000).

## 2. Comparative Reflections on Populism and the Radical Right – A Transatlantic View

Studies of right-wing populism or the radical right usually constrain themselves to either side of the Atlantic, thereby implicitly subscribing to or explicitly affirming the paradigm of American exceptionalism. Only a few publications, usually edited volumes, try a transatlantic or even global approach to these phenomena (see *Betz/Immerfall* 1998; *Kaplan/Weinberg* 1998; *Minkenberg* 1998; *Taggart* 2000; *Faber/Unger* 2008). But comparativists since Aristotle know that the exceptional can only be exposed by comparing (for a felicitous example, see *Lipset* 1996). Hence, even a quintessentially American movement such as the Tea Party might be understood by comparing it and putting it into context. In the following, this context will be historical (comparisons with previous incarnations of populism in the US) and contemporary (comparisons with European equivalents). But first, a few conceptual words are in order.

Definitions about the radical, populist or other right abound, usually by identifying some criteria which are deemed essential aspects. In the 1990s, when the radical right in Europe was on the rise, *Cas Mudde* calculated that in the literature on these parties, there were 26 different approaches of definition which included at least 58 different criteria, and later he attributes the “terminological chaos” to a lack of a clear and operational definition in most accounts (*Mudde* 1996: 229; *idem* 2007: 11-20). For the Tea Party which is often treated as a phenomenon *sui generis*, this definitional exercise (or lack thereof) is substituted by an exercise of characterization (populist, conservative, middle-class etc.) which, in turn, rests on largely implicit definitional assumptions. For example, when *Paul*

*Rahe* (2010) characterizes the Tea Party by pitting “ordinary citizens” and their “up-heaval” against “the elites” and “the tyrannical impulse underpinning the administrative state”, and by invoking Madison’s warning of the dangers resulting from an absence of “popular checks” against a national government running out of control (“the Progressives and their heirs – the proponents of the New Deal, the Great Society, and Barack Obama’s New Foundation”, *ibid.*, p. 17), he does nothing else than introducing a (vague) concept of populism (the common people against the establishment) to classify the Tea Party as an example of a more general phenomenon, i.e. anti-statist protest American style, or Madisonian democracy.<sup>1</sup>

In the US debate, the concept of populism is rather widespread though typically understood as a genuinely, hence specifically American concept. *Michael Kazin* in his history of American populism traces the term and concept back to the historical movement of Populism in the 1890s and its subsequent transitions and sees populism mainly as “a persistent yet mutable style of political rhetoric with roots deep in the nineteenth century” (*Kazin* 1995: 5). Others like *Margaret Canovan* stress the ideological components such as a political programme organized around anti-elitism and an appeal to ‘the people’ to justify criticism of representative democracy (see *Canovan* 1981: 289-294; also *Berlet/ Lyons* 2000: 4-13). Often, variations of populism such as left-wing and right-wing, agrarian and political are constructed to add nuance. Nonetheless, in his succinct but exhaustive overview of various versions of populism and the respective literature, *Paul Taggart* summarizes: “populism is a reaction against the ideas, institutions and practices of representative politics which celebrates an implicit or explicit heartland as a response to a sense of crisis; however, lacking universal key values, it is chameleonic, taking on attributes of its environment, and, in practice, is episodic” (*Taggart* 2000: 5).

According to this characterization, populism is more a political style and impulse (*Taggart* calls it “anti-political, empty-hearted”, *ibid.*) rather than a political program. As such, it connects well with all political movements which are directed against representative politics, mostly found on the political right in many Western democracies. In fact, many current definitions of the radical right focus on the combination of an anti-elite and anti-representational thrust and the populist style and rhetoric, aimed at mobilizing ‘the people’ against ‘the system’ or ‘the state’, often adding a particular nationalistic or xenophobic message to the concept and pointing out the contextual factor of a crisis, real or imagined. For example, *Hans-Georg Betz* in an early comparative work on the subject defines radical right-wing populism according to three ‘supply-side’ criteria: a) a critique of the welfare state, b) the refusal to integrate marginal groups in society, and c) a populist rhetoric (*Betz* 1994: 4). He argues that in the current phase of postindustrial capitalism, traditional political and social attachments are dissolved and both losers and winners of this process, i.e. unemployed and young entrepreneurs, vote, for different reasons, for parties of the radical right. With this broad definition *Betz* includes among the radical right very diverse phenomena, such as nationalist-authoritarian parties like the German ‘Republikaner’ and the Belgian ‘Vlaams Blok’ (now ‘Vlaams Belang’), and more economically liberal, anti-tax parties such as the Scandinavian Progress Parties. Similarly, *Mudde*’s concept of the populist radical right postulates as a definitional minimum nationalism and/or nativism and adds aspects of xenophobia, a strong state and welfare chauvinism as core ideological features in an expanded definition (see *Mudde* 2007: 15-23).

### 3. The Message and the Messenger – a Look at the Supply Side

Given the widespread definitions of populism, it is no big task to pigeonhole the Tea Party as the latest reincarnation of American populism (see *Rasmussen/Schoen* 2010; *Zernike* 2011a). However, a second look reveals that it is a very special brand of populism which puts the Tea Party closer to the European radical right than to the 19<sup>th</sup> century version of American populism. First, its anti-elitism and its frequent attacks on big government, big spending, ‘Obamacare’ etc. should not be confused with a principled rejection of the state. On the one hand, a typical Tea Party statement clearly opposes ‘big government’, as a participant put it in a focus group study: “I don’t want big government... I want the people to have the say-so” (quoted in *Zernike* 2011a: 153; see also *King*, in this issue). More specifically, it has been observed numerous times that on the one hand, the Tea Party questions all the federal approaches to problem solving in economic and social matters, from the New Deal on (see *Rahe* 2011; a telling rundown of Tea Party themes in *Rasmussen/Schoen* 2010: chap. 4). On the other hand, the Tea Party is not willing to dismantle government programs like Medicare or the US military which both are among the major spending units in the federal budget (see *Zernike* 2011a: 135).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the Tea Party’s opposition to government spending (or its “spreading the wealth around”) is voiced by many who benefit from Medicare, Social Security or disability payments (see *Williamson et al.* 2011: 32).<sup>3</sup> Behind the Tea Party’s anti-statism and anti-elitism does not lurk the elimination of state and elites, and an Athenian-style grass roots democracy but rather a different state and different elite. This echoes a familiar theme in US populism: it is liberal elites, and a Democratic government, more than elites and the state in general, which are the targets of criticism. Already in the early 1980s, *Richard Viguerie*, one of the masterminds of the 1970s New Right which helped Ronald Reagan and the Republicans into power, published a book titled “The Establishment vs. the People” (1983) in which he massively criticized “the establishment” and celebrated the founding fathers. Upon closer inspection, he disclosed that he did not want to do away with the establishment as such but with the *liberal* establishment in Congress, the media, the professions and so-called “interest group liberalism” (see *Minkenberg* 1990: 131).<sup>4</sup>

Here, the Tea Party links up with anti-establishment rhetoric of both other right-wing movements in the United States, such as the 1970s New Right and its religious offspring and ally, the Christian Right, and significant parts of the European radical right (see *Minkenberg* 1998: 142-149). The Christian Right’s critique of Congress, partisan politics and the federal courts went hand in hand with a statist philosophy which wanted to strengthen the executive (for example with the line item veto for the President), a strong administration as far as law and order were concerned, and even the acceptance of the welfare state as far as it remained largely in the hands of the states (see *Lowi* 1995: 197-208). In Europe, the radical right frequently attacks the established parties, parliament and the political elites, the mainstream media and the professions – and supports strengthening of the executive (e.g. in Germany: direct elections of the President, in France: the disempowerment of the parliament and cabinet) (see *Minkenberg* 1998: chap. 7; *Mudde* 2007: chap. 6). In sum, despite the specific situational context of the US government bailout of American banks and industries in the transition of the Bush to the Obama administration in which the Tea Party emerged, despite the heavy emphasis on taxes and the deficit, Tea Party populism ties in with that of other right-wing movements and parties on both sides of the Atlantic in the attack on the institutions and practices of

representative democracy. However, as far as the literature shows, they are less specific than the Christian Right or the European radical right when it comes to concepts which should substitute these institutions and practices (see *Zernike* 2011a).

One European group of radical right-wing politics deserves particular attention in this regard: the Danish and Norwegian Progress parties of the 1970s which attracted a considerable following by attacking their countries' tax systems; the Italian Lega Nord which equally criticized the country's use of tax money for government projects in the South and Italian state centralism in general; and the Austrian Freedom Party under Haider which pursued a similar strategy (see *Betz* 1994: 4-13). What these parties had in common was the focus on national policies of taxing and spending, an attack on undeserving beneficiaries of tax money, and calls for a dismantling of 'big government' – themes that echo American right-wing populist movements. What they also had in common was a slow but persistent readjustment of their main message over time, from their primarily anti-government anti-tax positions to a growing emphasis on immigration and xenophobia. In the end, the free market liberalism gave way to 'welfare chauvinism' and support for a vigorous state in the interest of the nation and nationalism, with principles of a 'fair market economy' rather than a 'free market economy', i.e. an economic program which is a peculiar mix of liberalism and socialism, and a strong dose of xenophobia which targets both particular migrant groups from other parts of the country and immigrants from abroad, most notably non-European immigrants (see *Minkenberg* 2000; also *Mudde* 2007: 122-132). Is this a likely trajectory of the Tea Party movement as well? Will it revitalize Buchanan-style populism of the 1990s?

Journalistic impressions and social science research indicate in fact a tendency towards an exclusionary patriotism among the Tea Party, the extreme end of which is represented by the so-called 'birthers', those who claim that President Obama was not born an American citizen and hence took over the White House illegitimately (see *Rasmussen/Schoen* 2010: 194-197; *Zernike* 2011a: 95-98). Observers generally agree that Tea Party organizers try to separate the movement from "fringe elements" (*Rasmussen/Schoen* 2010: 167) and try to avoid "divisive social issues" such as abortion or school prayer (see *Zernike* 2011a: 96, 104; 143f.). However, as one analyst remarked, "for a movement that does not want to talk about social issues, the Tea Party talks an awful lot about them".<sup>5</sup> The support for and by public figures, such as Tea Party backed Republican candidates in the 2010 Congressional elections or media personalities like Glenn Beck, Rush Limbaugh, Sarah Palin and others, reveals the strong current of social conservatism running underneath the officially proclaimed fiscal and economic platform (see, for example, *Rasmussen/Schoen* 2010: 184-197; *Zernike* 2011a: 92-98; *Karpowitz et al.*, 2011). And there are numerous accounts of the tendency to raise the flag along with social issues: calls by Tea Party Patriots, an umbrella organization of more than 2,000 local Tea Party groups, to ask Congress to enact "an official language of the United States" (see *Williamson et al.* 2011: 28; *Zernike* 2011a: 143f.); patriotic singing and prayers which frequently turn "folksy piety and patriotism ... into crude nativism, conspiracy theory, and xenophobia" (*Raban* 2010: 5; see also *Lepore* 2011: 99). These examples indicate a strong sense of patriotism which borders on xenophobia. In fact, while explicit racism is clearly rejected by most Tea Partiers, a more subtle version of 'othering' seems to run through the movement. There is strong opposition to President Obama as shown by a large majority of Tea Partiers who doubt Obama's nationality and a tendency of "racial neo-liberalism" in the Tea Party's criticism of Obama and the Democratic Party (see *Enck-Walzer* 2011:

24f.; *Williamson et al.* 2011: 34; see also below). Distrust of politicians is coupled with fear of immigrants and desire for stronger border control; and opposition to government spending for the poor and the national health insurance are unacceptable because the recipients are not seen as deserving. Here, the difference between the deserving, and the undeserving, the working poor and the non-working poor turns out to be “a cultural category rather than a straightforward definition” (*Williamson et al.* 2011: 33).

This is reinforced by the official distancing from the Christian Right and avoidance of social issues, while at the same time invoking religion and assuming the United States to have been founded as a Christian nation in an a-historical fashion (see *Lepore* 2011: 126-129). Again, this coding strongly resembles the European radical right’s concern with immigrants who undeservedly take away national resources, i.e. ‘welfare chauvinism’ (see above and *Betz* 1994: 170-184; *Mudde* 2007: 130-132). Finally, the Tea Party’s particular approach to appropriating American history by emphasizing the superiority of the ideas and institutions of the Founding Fathers (see also footnote 2), by calling upon Americans to return to the original meaning of the Constitution (so-called ‘originalism’) while at the same time exercising a relatively liberal handling of historical facts (the overemphasis on the Christian roots of the American revolution, or the disregard for the race issue at the founding of the United States) displays the high level of politics and instrumentalization of the past in the Tea Party movement (see *Lepore* 2011). The propensity to “historical simplism” (*Lipset/Raab* 1978: 8), the tendency to mythologize a country’s past is common to most ultranationalist and right-wing movements and ideologies (see *Minkenberg* 2000; also *Lipset/Raab* 1978) and serves as a powerful weapon in discrediting political opponents. This becomes even clearer when looking at the demand side of the phenomenon.

#### 4. Crises and Chauvinists – a Look at the Demand Side

On the ‘demand side’, key analytical concepts of right-wing populism and the radical right are often tied to a context of crisis, more particularly intense social and cultural change (see *Minkenberg*, 1998: chap. 1; 2000). Following earlier work by *Theodore W. Adorno et al.* (1969), *Seymour M. Lipset* (1960), and German sociologists *Erwin Scheuch* and *Hans-Dieter Klingemann* (1967) one can assume that the potential for radical right-wing movements exists in all industrial societies and should be understood as a ‘normal pathological’ condition. In all fast-growing modernizing countries there are people who cannot cope with economic and cultural developments and who react to the pressures of readjustment with rigidity and closed-mindedness. These reactions can be mobilized by right-wing movements or parties offering political philosophies that promise an elimination of pressures and a simpler, better society (see *Lipset/Raab* 1978: 4-17). These philosophies do not contain just any thinkable utopia but usually a romanticized version of the nation before the first large wave of modernization. That is, like *Ernst Bloch* in his analysis of National Socialism in 1932 (*Bloch* 1962; here pp. 104-160), *Scheuch* and *Klingemann* postulate that the core of the problem consists of a specifically asynchronous dealing with the past, especially a dissent about the evaluation of modernity in the respective societies.

It is such a social and cultural modernization shift following the 1960s which led to a renewal of the radical right in various Western democracies and to the emergence of new

actors and agendas. This shift has been conceptualized in numerous ways, such as 'post-industrialism', 'value change', 'late capitalism', 'the third modernity' and so on (see *Touraine* 1969; *Bell* 1973; *Beck* 1986; *Inglehart* 1997, among others). In this shift towards what can be summarily termed 'post-modernity', understood not as the opposite to modernity, but an increasingly reflexive process of modernization and a new, self-critical posture towards modernity, cultural orientations and competences (education, language, communication), a sharpened sense of crisis, and the primacy of the *Lebenswelt* (*Habermas*) assume a central role. The process can be read as a new phase of individualization and pluralization, along with a de-emphasis of authority, both religious and rational-legal in the Weberian sense (see *Inglehart* 1997).

Beginning in the 1960s, the United States experienced a rapid modernization shift which included a massive cultural and political liberalization in terms of the intensified separation of church and state and, legalization of abortion, the rise of the women's movement, the success of the civil rights movement, and political reforms in the wake of the student protests (see *Mickelthwait/Wooldridge* 2004: 64-68). Among the most prominent groups which formed then were those of the New Right and Christian Right (see *Minkenberg* 1990, 2000; *Williams* 2010; *Rozell* 2011). In the language of social movement research, the Christian Right organizations, most notably Moral Majority and Christian Coalition, operated as organizational foci in a network of networks of many single issue movements and helped mobilize and politicize protestant fundamentalists. This movement is inspired by a literal understanding of the Bible, in the vein of religious fundamentalism, sees the United States as a Christian nation and advocates a political platform, which, in the words of American political scientist *Theodore Lowi*, can be characterized as "a combination of the Bible and Edmund Burke" (1996: 6). Over the years, the Christian Right applied a strategy not unlike that of the European New Right in the 1970s, that is of mimicking the Left and applying a culture war or 'Gramscism from the Right' in order to establish a cultural hegemony before winning offices (see *Minkenberg* 1998: 141-166, 252-259; also *Lo* 1982; *Lind* 1996; *Pfahl-Traughber* 2004). With this approach, it succeeded if not in taking over key institutions of the United States, then at least large parts of the Republican Party (see *Minkenberg* 2003; *Rozell* 2011). In the 1990s, another radical right-wing group, the Pat Buchanan movement, appeared and built a new bridge between the Republican Party and the Christian Right. Buchanan's ethnocentrist 'America First' platform merged rather smoothly with the cultural nationalism of the Christian Right into American nativism: both wanted to preserve the 'European core' of the United States, both appealed to a similar audience in the 1990s, and both played a prominent role at the Republican convention of 1992 (see *Lind* 1995: 245-247; *Minkenberg* 1998: 343-346; also *Williams* 2010: 231).

Against this backdrop, the Tea Party continues certain traditions of the American conservative movement since Goldwater which has fundamentally transformed the Republican Party (see *Mickelthwait/Wooldridge* 2004; *Peele* 2011) while connecting them to the recent crisis of 2008 and after. Beyond the well-known tenets of populism and patriotism, the opposition to liberal elites, politics and 'big government', and the insistence on the religious nature of the American nation, ethnic markers appear, brought out by the Obama Presidency: "the ideology of grassroots Tea Party adherents fits with long-standing, well-documented connections between opposition to federal entitlement programs and espousal of racial stereotypes. This helps us situate this variant of populist mobilization in the broader history of post 1960s conservatism" (*Williamson et al.* 2011:



35). Indeed, numerous observers confirm the return of Goldwater references at Tea Party events or the logic of Goldwater conservatism (*ibid.*, and *Zernike* 2011a: 52-60).

In the election year of 2010, a series of Gallup polls<sup>6</sup> reported that the Tea Party rank and file constituted about a quarter of the American public (18% in the New York Times/CBS News Poll of April 2010, see *Zernike* 2011a: 218; for the following, see *ibid.*, pp. 195-227). They are 89% white and 1% black (all respondents: 77% and 12% respectively), and have an above average degree of education (33% have some college, and 23% some college, as opposed to all respondents with 28% and 15% respectively). But they are wealthier than the average American in *all* income brackets except for the lowest two, and not just the top brackets. In their age structure, they clearly diverge from the overall population: only 7% are younger than 30 years (compared to 23% overall), 46% are between 45 and 64 years (compared to 34%) and 29% are over 64 years (16%).

At the same time, the Tea Party supporters do not differ much from the followers of the Christian Right some decades earlier, with the possible exception of their education levels (see *Wilcox/Larson* 2006: 51-159). They practice religion more regularly than average Americans (50% and 35%, respectively, attend church every week or almost every week) and they exhibit a larger share of self-declared born-again Christians (39%) than the average Americans (28%) (*Zernike* 2011a: 225). Like adherents to the Christian Right, Tea Party supporters are clearly partisan: 54% of them consider themselves Republicans, only 5% Democrats, and the 36% of 'independent' Tea Party supporters include also Republican and Democratic 'leaners' who do not differ much from Republican and Democratic identifiers – hence it is realistic to assume that about three quarters of Tea Partiers are Republicans (see *Williamson et al.* 2011: 27). More precisely they are conservative Republicans, as the 73% who think of themselves as somewhat or very conservative indicate (*Zernike* 2011a: 226). Among current political figures which Tea Party supporters admire most, Newt Gingrich, Sarah Palin, George W. Bush and Mitt Romney top the list (57% of them have a favorable view of the former president, 66% of Sarah Palin, *ibid.* pp. 207f.). These findings are reinforced by reports that many Christian Right activists joined Tea Party groups (*Rozell* 2011: 127) – although it may be too early to determine whether the Christian Right is in the process of taking over the Tea Party movement.

The congruence between Tea Partyism and Republican conservatism Goldwater-, Buchanan- or early Christian Right-style is also highlighted by the role of the Tea Party in the 2010 midterm elections. Generally, the Tea Party is credited with contributing to the defeat of a number of Democrats (including incumbents) by conservative Republicans, such as Scott Brown in an early Senate election in Massachusetts, Ron Johnson in the Wisconsin and Rand Paul in the Kentucky Senate races.<sup>7</sup> In-depth analyses reveal only modest effects by Tea Party organizations; only endorsements by Freedom Works led to a significant increase in the vote share for a Republican candidate in the general election (see *Karpowitz et al.*, 2011). However, the movement was clearly decisive in a number of Republican primaries. As a correlation analysis shows, "candidates endorsed by the Tea Party Express and Sarah Palin garnered approximately 8–9 percentage points more than candidates who did not receive an endorsement. Candidates who adopted the Tea Party label themselves by signing the Contract from America did even better, with their vote shares increasing by more than 20 points" (*ibid.*, p. 306). In other words, Tea Party endorsement or self-endorsement improved the chances of a candidate to win the Republican nomination, and these candidates were typically of a very conservative persuasion and figured as insurgents challenging candidates backed by the party establish-

ment. As a result, Congress after the 2010 elections is more conservative and more polarized than ever before (see *Abramowitz* 2011). This echoes the role of the Christian Right in the 1994 elections which did not only produce Republican domination of the 104<sup>th</sup> Congress but a substantially more conservative Republican Party than before (see *Green et al.* 1995; *Minkenberg* 1996: 148-150).

Similar to previous right-wing movements, Tea Party supporters can be interpreted as the new ‘modernization losers’ in the wake of the crisis – an explanation which has also been employed for many of the European radical right supporters (see *Lipset/Raab* 1978; *Minkenberg* 2000). However, all ‘objectifying’ interpretations, which postulate a direct relationship between social and economic change and individual political behavior, must be treated carefully. For they neglect the dimension of political mediation and the subjective perception of the problems involved – or to speak with *Berger* and *Luckmann*, they overlook that a social and political construction of reality is involved. Various empirical studies showed that neither the actual level of unemployment nor the immediate presence or influx of immigrants correlate with a growth in right-wing attitudes or voting behavior (see e.g. *Mudde* 2007: 201-231). Here, it might be useful to remember *Ernst Bloch's* paradigm of a dual, i.e. objective and subjective, ‘dis-simultaneousness’ (see above).

Therefore, supporters of right-wing populism and the radical right today should be interpreted as ‘modernization losers’ in a subjective sense. These are primarily not victims of a process of social pauperization, like the working class in late 19<sup>th</sup> century or today’s unemployed, but ‘losers’ in a process of a differentiation of life chances. In post-modern society, where social and cultural capital is increasingly important, theirs is shrinking and they are intent on defending it against encroachments on their traditional entitlements. In this sense, they have been characterized as ‘welfare chauvinists’ (see above). This does not preclude at all an ideological component. Instead of a diffuse unease with post-modernity which might befall many, supporters of these movements are characterized by a mix of this unease, rigid thinking, authoritarian attitudes and traditional values – all of which reinforce each other (see *Lipset/Raab* 1978; *Spier* 2010).

For the United States, public opinion surveys demonstrate that adherents to the Moral Majority or Christian Coalition or Pat Robertson’s and Pat Buchanan’s voters were not simply dissatisfied voters who protest by sending a message to their party. They differ from both the general electorate and other ‘protest voters’ such as Ross Perot’s by their distinct ideological orientations (see *Minkenberg* 1998: 315-323). These reflect the large share of protestant fundamentalists among them. In socio-structural terms, they were rather working class and lower middle class with low to medium levels of formal education and a large concentration in the Southern states. But more than social characteristics, it was value orientations, traditional religiosity and an opposition to a pluralization of life styles which determine their political attitudes and behavior.

Survey data evidence (for the following see the New York Times/CBS Poll in *Zernike* 2011a: 195-227) suggest the supporters of the Tea Party share these characteristics of ‘subjective modernization losers’. They are united by the feeling that the United States are generally going in the wrong direction (92%, compared to 59% of all respondents), and their primary emotional reaction to politics in Washington is not dissatisfaction (41%, compared to 48% of all respondents) but “anger” (53%, compared to 19%; see *ibid.*, p. 204). Clearly, the economy is seen by them as the most important problem facing the country – but in that they do not differ from the rest of the country (23% and 23%, respectively). A difference emerges when it comes to who is mostly to blame for the eco-

nomic situation: only 5% of Tea Party supporters blame the Bush administration (32% of all respondents) but 10% the Obama administration (4%). The number one culprit for them, however, is Congress (28%, compared to 10% of all respondents). This may yet be another indicator of right-wing populists' distrust of institutions of representative government, in particular parliament, as discussed earlier – and is fully in line with previous movements such as the Christian Right or the Wallace movement. However, in the case of the Tea Party, another dimension which is related to the current president assumes prominence: a strong rejection of Barack Obama whom Tea Partiers deeply distrust. Only 20% of them believe he shares the values of most Americans (57% overall); 92% of them think Obama is moving the country towards socialism (52% overall). Moreover, only 41% (compared to 58% overall) think he was born in the United States, that is almost two thirds of the Tea Partiers see in him an illegitimate president. Similar discrepancies between the beliefs of Tea Party supporters and the American public in general can be seen with regard to the issues of illegal immigration, problems facing black people, global warming, same-sex marriage, abortion and gun control, with Tea Partiers being decidedly more conservative. Yet at the same time, 84% of Tea Party supporters think their views reflect the views of most Americans (compared to 25% overall). While these data do not suggest that Tea Party supporters are an ideologically uniform bloc they demonstrate an identifiable pattern: Tea Partiers tend to have a very particular view of the country, its problems and its president which is more radical and right-wing, especially more anti-Obama and socially conservative and in some instances more out of touch with reality, than that of the average American (see also *Lepore* 2010; *Williamson* et al. 2011: 32-34). Some interpret it as a distinctly “Southern ideological conservatism”, with racist connotations (*King*, in this issue; see also *Lind* 1996, pp. 123-133). This puts it in line with Goldwater and Wallace, and their followers. And like these, the Tea Party and its leaders exhibit traces of “heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspirational fantasy”, that is the “angry mind” of the “paranoid style”, as defined famously by *Richard Hofstadter*: “the clinical paranoid sees the hostile and conspirational world in which he finds himself to be living as directed specifically *against him*; whereas the spokesman of the paranoid style finds it directed against a nation, a culture, a way of life whose fate affects not himself alone but millions of others... His sense that his political passions are unselfish and patriotic, in fact, goes far to intensify his feeling of righteousness and his moral indignation” (*Hofstadter* 1965: 3-4, emphasis in the original; see also *Lipset/Raab* 1978: 12-17; *Williamson* et al., 2011: 35).

## 5. Conclusion

The Tea Party movement stands in the tradition of many right-wing populist movements in American history – and is also comparable to its European counterpart, the contemporary radical right, if not in the programmatic package it offers then in its welfare chauvinist and anti-parliamentary thrust, its populist style, and key characteristics of its support base. Rather than being a populist anti-government revolt and far from an independent movement, the Tea Party is the continuation of a long-standing post-war right-wing tradition, from Joseph McCarthy to Barry Goldwater, George Wallace, the Christian Right and Pat Buchanan. As such it is an expression of “backlash politics” (*Lipset/Raab*, 1978: 29) in a dual way. First a ‘supply side’ backlash against a government and a president

who embody values and politics diametrically opposed to the particular utopia of Tea Party America. That is, behind the tax-and-spend rhetoric and anti-Obamaism of leaders and activists lurk social conservatism and even racist overtones. Examples include the popularity of Goldwater conservatism among Tea Partiers (he campaigned on the issue of states' rights, i.e. the continuation of racial segregation in the South) or the role of the Koch family, of Birch Society fame (known for its conspiracy theories and homeland nativism), in establishing one of the most important Tea Party organizations, Freedom Works (see Zernike 2011a: 35; also Micklethwait/Wooldridge 2004: 61; Lipset/Raab 1978: 248-287). Like the Christian Right before, which played a marginal role in recent elections, the Tea Party has begun to take over the Republican Party and is credited with having had decisive influence on the midterm elections in 2010. Considering the observation that Christian Right activists and social conservatives make up a large and assumedly increasing portion of Tea Party activists, it seems likely that a merger of Christian Right and the Tea Party will result in a re-birth of the former and a metamorphosis of the latter – thereby consolidating the cultural conservative current within the Republican Party.

The second backlash occurs at the level of the 'demand side', or the supporters. Similar to their predecessors, supporters of the Tea Party movement are the current 'modernization losers' in the wake of a crisis (an explanation which has also been employed for many of the European radical right supporters). Their reaction to, and interpretation of, the financial crisis exposes a political outlook which is more than a sense of economic loss and a diffuse protest against Washington. It is a decidedly right-wing ideology which merges economic with social and cultural concerns, and it has deep roots in the American political culture: "... extreme *rightist* movements have been more indigenous to America [than leftist movements; M.M.] and have left more of a mark on its history" (Lipset/Raab 1978: 3, emphasis in the original). Profound unease with the direction the country is headed under its first African-American president and anger at those who are seen as responsible for the economic and cultural downturn fuel a political style which has been characterized as 'paranoid' and has itself a long history in American politics: "The recurrence of the paranoid style over a long span of time and indifferent places suggests that a mentality disposed to see the world in the paranoid's way may always be present in some considerable minority of the population. But the fact that movements employing the paranoid style are not constant but come in successive episodic waves suggests that the paranoid disposition is mobilized into action chiefly by social conflicts that involve ultimate schemes of values and that bring fundamental fears and hatreds, rather than negotiable interests, into political action. Catastrophe or the fear of catastrophe is most likely to elicit the syndrome of paranoid rhetoric." (Hofstadter 1965: 39) The question arises which is the true catastrophe for the Tea Party movement: the financial meltdown in 2008 and the deficit, or the election of Barack Obama.

## Notes

- 1 Of course, Rahe's is a vastly simplistic version of Madison's idea of checks and balances with "popular checks" being only one type of a myriad of checks and balances; see article by Lynn, this issue, figures 1 and 2.
- 2 See also <http://www.usgovernmentspending.com/breakdown> (accessed August 22, 2011).
- 3 The Tea Party's opposition to big government and government spending goes hand in hand with the acceptance of big money. For example, Freedom Works, one of the key organizations in the movement,

- evolved from a group underwritten by the wealthy and conservative Koch family (see *Zernike* 2011a: 35); another core groupe, Tea Party Express, likewise attracted big money which it spent in Republican primaries (see *Williamson et al.* 2011: 28; also *Zernike* 2011a: 155). This earned the Tea Party the label “astro-turf” which critics use to point out the influential role of wealthy conservative groups and lobby organizations in what claims to be a grass-roots movement. In that, the Tea Party continues the tradition of alliances between big money and right-wing populism in America, from Henry Ford onwards (see *Berlet/Lyons* 2000).
- 4 In an interview with the author in Washington DC in April 1986, *Viguerie* asserted: “I am not anti-establishment per se ... I have no problem with the establishment. It is this establishment that is working against the best interests of the people which concerns me. You take two hundred years ago, our country had a wonderful establishment” (in *Minkenberg* 1990: 148). It does not come as a surprise that today, *Richard Viguerie* supports the Tea Party movement as a promising reincarnation of American populism (see *Rasmussen/Schoen* 2010: 119, 196f.).
  - 5 Prof. *Gabriel Hudson*, George Mason University, at the panel “Sex, Gender, and the Tea Party”, APSA 2011 Annual Meeting, Seattle, WA, Sep. 4, 2011. See also his paper at this panel “Civil Rights and LGBTQ Scapegoats in the Tea Party Movement”.
  - 6 See *Jeffrey Jones*, Americans see Positive, Negative Effects of Tea Party Movement, in: Gallup, November 4, 2010; <http://www.gallup.com/poll/144242/americans-positive-negative-effects-tea-party-movement.aspx>, (accessed Oct. 3, 2011).
  - 7 See ABC News, Which Tea Party Candidates Won? November 3, 2010; [http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/2010\\_Elections/vote-2010-elections-tea-party-winners-losers/story?id=12023076](http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/2010_Elections/vote-2010-elections-tea-party-winners-losers/story?id=12023076), (accessed October 3, 2011); also *Zernike* 2011a: 86-92.

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*Anschrift des Autors:*

Prof. Dr. Michael Minkenberg, Professur Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft, Kulturwissenschaftliche Fakultät, Europa-Universität Viadrina, Postfach 1786, D-15207 Frankfurt (Oder)  
E-Mail: [minkenberg@europa-uni.de](mailto:minkenberg@europa-uni.de)